



"What is it down?" I exclaimed with some astonishment.

"Lord bless you, no!" said Wallbridge, surprised in his turn. "Strong and steady at eighty, but we didn't sell a hundred shares to-day. Well, I'm in a rush. Good-by, if you don't want to buy or sell." And he hurried off without waiting for a reply.

So I was now assured that Doddridge Knapp had not displaced me in the Omega deal. It was a recess to prepare another surprise for the street, and I had time to attend to a neglected duty.

The undertaker's shop that held the morgue looked hardly less gloomy in the afternoon sun than in the light of breaking day in which I had left it when I parted from Detective Coogan. The office was decorated mournfully to accord with the grief of friends who ordered the coffins, or the feelings of the surviving relatives on settling the bills.

"I am Henry Wilton," I explained to the man in charge. "There was a body left here by Detective Coogan to my order, I believe."

"Oh, yes," he said. "What do you want done with it?"

I explained that I wished to arrange to have it deposited in a vault for a time, as I might carry it east.

"That's easy done," he said; and he explained the details. "Would you like to see the body?" he concluded. "We embalmed it on the strength of Coogan's order."

I shrank from another look at the battered form. The awfulness of the tragedy came upon me with hardly less force than in the moment when I had first faced the mangled and bleeding body on the slab in the dead-room.

The undertaker was talking, but I knew not what he said. I was shaking with the horror and grief of the situation, and in that moment I renewed my vow to have blood for blood and life for life, if law and justice were to be had.

"We'll take it out any time," said the undertaker, with a decorous reflection of my grief upon his face. "Would you like to accompany the remains?"

I decided that I would. "Well, there's nothing doing now. We can start as soon as we have sealed the casket."

"As soon as you can. There's nothing to wait for."

The ride to the cemetery took me through a part of San Francisco that I had not yet seen. But I paid little attention to the streets through which we passed. My mind was on the friend whose name I had taken, whose work I was to do. I was back with him in our boyhood days, and lived again for the fleeting minutes the life we had lived in common; and the resolve grew stronger on me that his fate should be avenged.

Arriving at the cemetery it was soon over. The body of Henry Wilton was committed to the vault with the single mourner looking on, and we drove rapidly back in the falling light.

I had given my address at the undertaker's shop, and the hack stopped in front of my house of mystery before I knew where we were. Darkness had come upon the place, and the street-lamps were alight and the gas was blazing in the store-windows along the thoroughfares. As I stepped out of the carriage and gazed about me, I recognized the gloomy doorway and its neighborhood that had greeted me on my first night in San Francisco.

As I was paying the fare a stout figure stepped up to me. "Ah, Mr. Wilton, it's you again. I turned in surprise. It was the policeman I had met on my first night in San Francisco.

"Oh, Corson, how are you?" I said heartily, recognizing him at last. I felt a sense of relief in the sight of him. The place was not one to quiet my nerves after the errand from which I had just come.

"All's well, sor, but I've a bit of paper for ye." And after some hunting he brought it forth. "I was asked to hand this to ye."

I took it in wonder. Was there something more from Detective Coogan? I tore open the envelope and read on its inclosure:

"Kum tonite to the house. Shure if your life is worth savin'."

"Muther Borton."

#### CHAPTER XIX.

##### Mother Borton's Advice.

I studied the note carefully, and then turned to Policeman Corson. "When did she give you this—and where?"

"A lady?" said Corson with a grin. "Ah, Mr. Wilton, it's too sly she is to give it to me. 'Twas a boy askin' for ye. 'Do you know him?' says he. 'I do that,' says I. 'Where is he?' says he. 'I don't know,' says I. 'Has 'e a room?' says he. 'He has,' says I. 'Where is it?' says he. 'What's that to you?' says I."

"Yes, yes," I interrupted. "But where did he get the note?"

"I was just tellin' ye, sor," said the policeman amiably. "He shoves the note at me ag'in, an' says he, 'It's important,' says he. 'Go up there,' says I. 'Last room, top floor, right-hand side.' Before I comes to the corner on

here, he's after me ag'in. 'He's gone,' says he. 'Like enough,' says I. 'When'll he be back?' says he. 'When the cows come home, sonny,' says I. 'Then there'll be the devil to pay,' says he. I pricks up my ears at this. 'Why?' says I. 'Oh, he'll be killed,' says he, 'and I'll git the derndest lickin',' says he. 'What's up?' says I, makin' a grab for him. But he ducks an' blubbers. 'Gimme that letter,' says I, 'and you just kite back to the folks that sent you, and tell them what's the matter. I'll give your note to your man if he comes while I'm on the beat,' says I. I knows too much to try to git anything more out of him. I says to meself that Mr. Wilton ain't in the safest place in the world, and this kid's folks maybe means him well, and might know some other place to look for him. The kid jaws a bit, an' then does as I tells him, an' cuts away. That's half an hour ago, an' here you are, an' here's your letter."

I hesitated for a little before saying anything. It was with quick suspicion that I wondered why Mother Borton had secured again that gloomy and deserted house for the interview she was planning.

"That was very kind of you. You didn't know what was in the letter then?"

"No, sor," replied Corson with a touch of wounded pride. "It's not me as would open another man's letter unless in the way of me duty."

"Do you know Mother Borton?" I continued.

"Know her? know her?" returned Corson in a tone scornful of doubt on such a point. "Do I know the slickest crook in San Francisco? Ah, it's many a story I could tell you, Mr. Wilton, of the way that old she-devil has slipped through our fingers when we thought our hands were on her throat. And it's many of her brood we have put safe in San Quentin."

"Yes, I suppose so," said I dryly. "But the woman has done me service—saved my life, I may say—and I'm willing to forget the bad in her."

"That's not for me to say, sor; but there's quare things happens, no doubt."

"This note," I continued, "is written over her name. I don't know whether it came from her or not; but if she sent it I must see her. It may be a case of life or death for me."

"An' if it didn't come from her?" asked the policeman shrewdly.

"Then," said I grimly, "it's likely to be a case of death if I venture alone."

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Wilton," said Corson after a pause. "If you'll wait a bit, I'll go with you—that is, if there isn't somebody else you'd like better to have by your side to-night. You don't look to have any of your friends about."

"Just the thing," I said heartily. "There's no one I'd rather have. We'll go down as soon as we can get a bite to eat."

"I'll have to wait a bit, sor, till my relief comes. He'll be along soon. As for getting a bite, you can't do better than wait till you get to Mother Borton's. It's a rough place, but it's got a name for good cooking."

I was bewildered. "I guess there's not much to be got in the way of eating in the house. There was nothing left in it yesterday morning but the rats." I spoke with considerable emphasis.

"That's quare, now," he said, looking to see if there was a jest behind the words. "But 'twas all there when McPherson and I put a club to a drunk as was raising the Ould Nick in the place and smashing the bottles, net six hours ago. When we took him away in the express wagon the ould woman was rowling out those long black curses in a way that would warm the heart of the foul fiend himself."

There was some fresh mystery about this. I held my tongue with the reflection that I had better let it straighten itself out than risk a stumble by asking about things I ought to know.

Corson's relief soon appeared. "It's a nasty night," he said, buttoning up his overcoat closely, as Corson gave him a brief report of the situation on the beat.

"It's good for them as likes it dark," said Corson.

"It's just such a night as we had when Donaldson was murdered. Do you mind it?"

"Do I mind it? Am I likely to forget it? Well, a pleasant time to you, me boy. Come along, sor. We'd better be moving. You won't mind stepping up to the hall with me, will ye, while I report?"

"Certainly not," I said with a shiver, half at the grim suggestion of murder and half at the chill of the fog and the cutting wind that blew the cold vapor through to the skin.

"You've no overcoat," said Corson. "We'll stop and get one. I'll have mine from the station."

The silence of the house of mystery was no less threatening now than on the night when Henry Wilton was walking through the halls on the way to his death. But the stout-hearted policeman by my side gave me confidence, and no sign showed the pres-

ence of an enemy as I secured Henry's heavy overcoat and the large revolver he had given me, and we took our way down the stairs.

A short visit to the grimy, foul-smelling basement of the City Hall, a brisk walk with the cutting wind at our backs and I felt rather than saw that we were in the neighborhood of the scene of my adventures of a night that had come so near costing me my life, and then I saw the lantern sign give forth its promise of the varied entertainment that could be had at Borton's.

"Here we are," said Corson. We pushed open the door and entered. The place had the same appearance as the one to which I had been taken by Dicky Nahl.

"A fine night, Mother Borton," said Corson cheerily, as he was the first to enter, and then added under his breath,—"for the devil's business."

Mother Borton stared at him with a black look and muttered a curse. "Good evening," I hastened to say. "I took the liberty to bring a friend; he doesn't come as an officer to-night."

The effect on the hag's features was marvelous. The black scowl lightened, the tight-drawn lips relaxed, and there was a sign of pleasure in the bright eyes that had flashed hatred at the policeman.

"Ah, it's you, is it?" she said sharply, but with a tone of kindness in her greeting. "I didn't see ye. Now sit down and find a table, and I'll be with ye after a bit."

"We want a dinner, and a good one. I'm half-starved."

"Are ye, honey?" said the woman with delight. "Then it's the best dinner in town ye shall have. Here, Jim! Put these gentlemen over there at the corner table."

"It's not the aristocracy of stolle ye get here," said Corson, lighting his pipe after the coffee, "but it's prime eating."

I nodded in lazy contentment, and then started up in remembrance of the occasion of our being in this place as the shadow of Mother Borton fell across the table.

"If you will go upstairs," she said sourly. "You know the way. I guess your friend can spare you."

"Is there anything that can't be told before him?" I asked.

"You'll be safer in my care than in his," she said, with warning in her tone. "Yes, yes, I know I am safe here, but how is it with my friend if I leave him here? We came together and we'll go together."

The crone nodded with a laugh that ended in a snarl.

"If the gang knew he was here there would be more fun than you saw the other night."

"Don't worry about me, Mr. Wilton," said Corson with a grin. "I've stood her crowd off before, and I can do it again if the need comes. But I'd rather smoke a pipe in peace."

"You can smoke in peace, but it's not yourself you can thank for it," said Mother Borton sharply. "There'll be no trouble here to-night. Come along." And the old woman started for the door.

"Are you sure you're all right?" asked Corson in a low voice. "There's men gone up those stairs that came down with a sheet over them."

"It's all right—that is, unless there's danger to you in leaving you here."

"No. Go ahead. I'll wait for ye. I'd as lief sit here as anywhere."

I hastened after Mother Borton, who was glowering at me from the doorway, and followed her footsteps in silence to the floor above.

Mother Borton walked the passage cautiously and in silence, and I followed her example until she pushed open a door and was swallowed up in the blackness. Then I pushed on the threshold while she lighted a candle; and as I entered, she swiftly closed and locked the door behind me.

(To be continued.)

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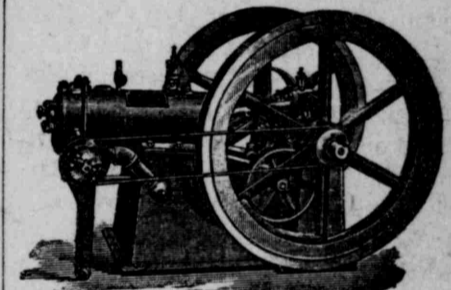
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